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CRAFTING THE FEVER

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CRAFTING THE FEVER

THE HIBISCUS SNAKE

A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing:

Poetry

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by

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ABSTRACT

The Hibiscus Snake is a collection of poetry investigating the female experience encountering danger. She explores psychic landscapes descended in the unconscious uncanny, the feminine body within the context of horror, and lyrical poems about living in working class communities in San Bernardino. The collection attempts to subvert the presentation of the female body in Horror genres, moving it from a position of victimization to empowerment. In other poems, the speaker ventures into horror-like psychic landscapes filled with images representing the anxiety experienced growing up in a city where danger is quite real. The protagonist risks these journeys to overcome her fear and achieve a transformation. The collection also contains elegies written in lyrical, free-verse form. I also explicate how I employ line breaks to exaggerate the multiplicity of lines, words and connotations. This collection works toward understanding and redefining the female experience and identity within a range of male dominated contexts and dangerous environments.

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As a young girl, my mother sat me down to explain how dangerous the world can be, as a woman and especially as a citizen of San Bernardino.

One afternoon as I did cartwheels and hand-stands outside, I noticed the slightest movement coming from the hibiscus bush in our front yard. It was summer and the hibiscuses were thriving, among their red lips there was a snake, though I cannot remember what kind specifically. Its large body was coiled around the stem of the bush. I stared into its black eyes wondering how long it had been hidden, watching me dance so attentively. I asked the snake its name, expecting it to answer. From the kitchen window, my mother noticed me staring into the bush, close to reaching out my hand to touch the snake's sleek body. It wasn't long before my father sacked the snake in a canvass bag and slayed it out of anger and fear.

I still feel guilty about my curiosity resulting in the snake's death, but I always thought of the hibiscus snake as an omen to signify the danger approaching. This is why I have titled the manuscript "The Hibiscus Snake."

At its core, my poetry is the rejection of experiencing or witnessing powerlessness. The poems in my collection thus far show the thematic range I have been constructing since 2011. I include investigations of frustrated psychic

landscapes descended in the uncanny, the female body within the context of Horror, Inland Empire lyrical poems, and my newer work, which is centered around the idea of feminine sexuality as a great power and vulnerability simultaneously.

Section 2: I Am

My poetic journey starts at a necessary point of self-definition. When I think of myself as a poet, I am thinking of myself, in part, as a lens interpreting its intake and outputting language, therefore, self-awareness is an essential basis for my poetics.

Sandra M. Gilbert's essay, *"My Name is Darkness": The Poetry of Self-Definition* delves into a handful of self-defining poets, pointing out the disparity between the public (external) and private (internal) selves. Written in 1977, this essay has since encouraged women writers to define the other or second self which inhabits them. My "self" or the central voice of my poetry–briefly summarized–aligns with the inner self Gilbert points out as inhabiting the writers in her essay. This self rejects imposed definitions of woman and the self and instead is, "irrational, antisocial, and therefore–in the best romantic tradition–associated with the supernatural" (Gilbert, 125). Thanks to the strides women writers and feminist movements have made since, what would have been my private or second self/voice is my public self. Therefore, many of the women walking about my poetry are dark prowling figures or tough street smart girls in

dangerous environments protecting and preserving the light inhabiting them. There is a multitude of “I”s and speakers within my manuscript, but the prominent horror-like “I” emerges while in the face of threat, she embodies the rejection of victimization.

Section 3: The Female Body as Abject

It is no secret that the female body is under constant surveillance and scrutiny. I can remember walking home from school, at age fourteen, and being approached by a man trying to lure me into an old black Chevy. I also remember the harsh comments we girls could make about our peers as our bodies grew in and out of awkward phases. My mother was right: The world would not protect me or watch its mouth and eyes so that I could maneuver the tricky waters of development with ease. During those times I wished for a face that could terrify gawking men and vicious peers and felt empowered by poems such as Anne Sexton’s famous poem Her Kind.

> I have gone out, a possessed witch,
> haunting the black air, braver at night;
> dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
> over the plain houses, light by light:
> lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
> A woman like that is not a woman, quite.

I have been her kind (Sexton, 304)

As a result, the dark “twelve fingered” woman who has historically dwelled privately inside women writers became the public and primary voice in my collection. She is brooding and fortified by her body’s natural qualities in sexual contexts.

You kiss my mouth
a bright gash
in a fat plum revealing
its pulp like a wild woman

My search for female figures who subverted power dynamics led me to Japanese Horror films such as *The Ring* and video games such as the *Silent Hill* series. I admire the trend I noticed in the most impactful enemies: they are little girls or women and the most frightening facet of their characters is their bodies. The possibility of a little girl seeking revenge, wielding supernatural powers and terrifying predators drew me to movies like *The Ring*. In survival horror, the enemies are radically different and yet similar in their terror. Take for example Silent Hill’s latest installment, *P.T (Playable Trailer).* In this first person game you are investigating a looping hallway, haunted by malicious ghosts and ominous sounds. The ghost of Lisa cries and wanders down the hallway, as a bloody fetus

cries from a bathroom sink. Her body is warped and elongated and there is blood on the crotch of her nightgown. As the game progresses we realize Lisa was a pregnant woman, murdered by her disturbed husband. Thus, you are playing the game as the husband trapped in his own damned hallway where Lisa acts out her revenge over and over again.

This video game employs the abject as we see it in French theorist, Julia Kristeva's essay, "Approaching Abjection" from her book *The Powers of Horror*. In short, the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 4). These "borders" include the borders between inside/outside, self/maternity, and ultimately life/death. Bodily fluids, vomit, blood–all abjections or jettisoned objects from the body–remind us of the fragility of the law of the father (symbolic rules determined by patriarchy) and our own mortality.

In American history the female body has been covered by layers of veils, it itself is abject, because we women bleed, our jettisoned blood, works abjectly twofold: One, it violates the border of the self/maternity. The violence and bodily fluids of child birth reminds us of the semiotic period during which we relied solely on our mother until we separated or rejected the maternal body in order to establish a sense of self. Two, the blood violates the inside/outside border, reminding us of our own mortality and the cosmic power/role as creator women possess. Blood is the signifier of both life and death.

Lisa is an abjection, her maternal body and bloody nightgown are the source of horror in this example; Under Kristeva's psychoanalytic lens her death represents the fragility of patriarchal law and her bloody nightgown and fetus remind us of the womb which is, "a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered" (Kristeva 8). The womb reminds us of the bodily, bloody beginnings; a time in which we are at our most vulnerable, mother and child are one, the latter's existence relying totally on the mother. This disintegration of borders and disruption of one's sense of self is what is horrifying about the maternal body.

In "Untitled," inspired by Lisa and many other instances of the female body displayed as an object of horror (or abjection), I wrote a poem in which the speaker yearns to possess supernatural powers to haunt or seek revenge on a man who has victimized her. She wishes to accomplish this by using her body, with all its fertile glory, as a source of terrifying power.

I have been wooing the moon
in hope she will strike me wild
& I will let go like a handkerchief
from a train window leaving a dark city.
I want to ride the world trying to throw me off
balance saying *you filled out.* I want a face
like a possum dodging the sluice of traffic & an ax

with steel strings–to be unrecognizable to the man

who tried to puppet me. I want him to see me

hair static with mana

messy lipstick

the warped smile of a doll possessed,

blood on the crotch of my nightgown

in a hallway with all the windows & doors locked.

Shadow rocking the chandelier, that no one else can see.

I don't want his brother or wife

to believe him, but him

to believe in me.

Rather than being a victimized object because of her sexuality, the speaker is presenting her female body and its sexuality to turn the tables and instead be the victimizer in an act of revenge.

Section 4: Kristeva, Survival Horror, and Psychic Landscapes

As I write this essay, the city mourns its twenty second homicide this year, the second double homicide of the week. According to our local paper, the *San Bernardino Sun News,* the victims of Thursday, April 21, 2016's double homicide were a young couple, one 19 year old male and the other a 17 year old female. "Police officers responded around 3:15 p.m. to a deadly car-to-car shooting in the

2900 block of North Pershing Avenue, where a man was dead inside a vehicle and a woman was taken to a local hospital where she died" (Valenzuela). In the broad daylight, these two residents of San Bernardino were murdered, not even 20 years old.

I wish I could romanticize what it is to live in an impoverished city with high crime rates; to say that now I'm a streetwise vigilante jumping across rooftops, but I am not. As I approach intersections within neighborhoods and downtown, I'm on edge.

I began writing poems that ventured into a horror-like psychic landscape to represent the anxiety I experienced growing up in San Bernardino where danger is quite real. The inception of these poems was heavily influenced by video games from the survival horror genre, specifically the *Silent Hill* series, which I admire for its ability to frustrate stereotypes. Contrary to popular first-person-shooter games, it is with great difficulty that you may conquer or progress to other territories, weaponry and opportunities for self-defense are scarce, and you are essentially a feeble protagonist trying to escape a hell which is populated with pseudo-enemies. Much like the protagonists of *Silent Hill* and *Lone Survivor*, the speakers of my poems venture into the darkest bowels of the unconscious in order to escape. Julia Kristeva makes similar claims about Horror in *The Powers of Horror.*

> A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, […] but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved" (Kristeva, 8)

The speakers of my poems venture on journeys into the self or their own psychic landscapes in order to resolve the fears and anxieties they experience in the real world. The images and figures within the poems are representations of those anxieties. Many of the poems conclude in dead ends or with transformations. In "Lucy Downtown" the protagonist is trying to escape the memories of a city inhabited by uncanny creatures and ghosts.

No one was after you
except the past
few cloudless days
you've seen a city that looks
like your life
from a grassy hilltop
Yellow eyes bulb downtown
cars bleat past the others
swollen inside, glitching about the narrow back alleys
They turn toward you on their heels

a ghost rises from a dying roach

Someone else survived

You, ready for the sun

At the start of the poem we are introduced to the protagonist's paranoia "No one was after you." She imagines she is being chased, but perhaps what really chases after Lucy is the memory of living in a violent environment, even as she looks at her life from the distance and peace of the "the grassy hilltop." The image of "yellow eyes" represent illness, the figures "glitching about the narrow back alleys" can be interpreted as those abandoned or trapped within the margins of the sickly city. Even the cars "bleat past" screaming into the night like sheep. I venture into this representation of the unconscious city in an attempt to master the fear and doubt. This poem is optimistic, "Someone else survived/ You ready for the sun." Lucy has left the city: it is as if the weaker part of her died in the city and instead she is survived by, or transformed into, a stronger sense of self, one that is "ready for the sun."

Section 5: The Inland Empire

Although much of my poetry focuses on the threat/power dynamic of the emerging feminine sexuality and female body, I also write poetry simply as a witness of San Bernardino and its citizens. Through poetry I also express my love for men as well as my anxieties about them.

I write about local figures within San Bernardino, many of them men, hoping to maintain the balance between witnessing these figures and being honest about the stories, rather than exploiting them in a clumsy attempt to create depth in my work.

Like many other cities that struggle economically, San Bernardino loses many of its citizens to narcotic use. In more personal poetry, I question what luck or guidance saved me from a fate that many neighbors, friends, family members, and even old lovers have faced. For me, this poetry is much more emotional and unafraid of its confessionalism–at its core an elegy.

Word on the street is
    you were shot,
point blank in the chest
and lived. How many times now
have you stood up death? There she goes
bone blonde and pissed off
boarding the bus. She'll be back
with her acrylic talons to
collect her bounty–your beautiful
body crouched in a tweaked doorway.
    A little bird or
a pigeon with bloodlets for eyes tells me

You think you're hard and you are

a diamond in the rough throat of Berdoo evaporating.

My friend, my child hood

love, the figure, the clarity of the pookie pipe

beneath a pillow can make you deny a sunset. It's not fair,

the wasteland a loveless house contains

This is an elegy I wrote for a childhood friend I refer to as Anthony. As a local figure Anthony is known to have survived major injuries as a result of the violence in our community. But rather than simply describe Anthony's decline, I try to witness and investigate what threats exist in his realm of being. I personify death as a "bone blonde" with acrylic nails in an attempt to make death appear as a dangerous woman Anthony courts from "tweaked doorways" or meth houses that are speckled throughout the city. The "pigeon with bloodlets for eyes" is a representation of the gossipers within these neighborhoods, who carry out and report on violent occurrences. Then the image "clarity of a pookie pipe beneath a pillow" is the moment of realization in the poem. At this point, the speaker knows the truth about Anthony's decline, but admits this truth can make one fall into a state of denial, one that denies truths that are undeniable like "a sunset" before crying out the unfairness of the situation and identifying "a loveless house" as the reason for Anthony's problems. Overall, Anthony represents many young men in economically challenged cities like San

Bernardino and “Anthony’s Saga” and other poems like it in my collection express love, heartbreak and outrage at their suffering.

Confessional poems such as “Anthony’s Saga” tend to contain lyrical lines which are rife with emotional outcries. Arielle Greene, an associate Professor at Columbia College writes in *Mad Girls’ Love Songs: Two Women Poets Discuss Sylvia Plath, Angst, and Poetics of Female Adolescence,* an essay about what draws young female writers toward confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath, admire “her [Plath’s] ability to craft the fever of emotions into verse: poems with an incredible ear for the natural cadences of contemporary English…that employ bold and rich figurative language” (Greene, 188). The emotional, thematic, rhetorical, and theoretic content of a poem is a portion of what, for me, makes a great poem. There is still craft to consider and the technique I use when I break lines is one important way in which I, “craft the fever of emotions.”

Section 6: Breaking the Line

I turn to Denise Levertov’s essay “On the Function of the Line” when studying how to execute the line. During the interim between undergraduate and graduate school, the essay was the first source to articulate and justify my preference for the line break as one of my sharper tools over prioritizing metrically measuring the line. “More than most poetry of the past, [it] incorporates and reveals the *process* of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking, rather than focusing exclusively on the *results*” (Levertov, 265). I often brought poetry to workshop

that experimented with different methods of breaking the line, forming the style that best revealed the train of thought the individual poem is trying to work through, occasionally based on genre.

There is a misconception on the purpose of the line break: that it strictly promotes hesitation between words, but it serves a greater purpose than being the pregnant pause. "…the way the lines are broken affects not only the rhythm but pitch patterns" (Levertov, 267). The cadence of a line tends to suffer as we beginning poets prioritize figurative language and imagery over sound. The musicality of a poem is as important as its symbolic weight. When listening to music, I wouldn't like to hear the same chords (or percussion) throughout the whole piece. So why would it be okay for poetry to sound monotonous?

In "Abuela In Colombia, 1970" I use line breaks to naturally manipulate pitch and produce a cadence that varies, creating a pleasurable sonic experience.

I have one photo of you carrying a bucket
Your mouth broad
with indigenous grief
ankles thick as a baby's neck
…The moon and you

You can hear the changes in cadence between the lines “Your mouth broad/with indigenous grief.” The two lines execute a change in vowel sounds starting with low and wide open /o/ vowels. The second sharply changes to a higher pitched /i/. The third line “Thick as a baby’s neck” moves away from vowels and asserts the harsh and voiceless cacophony of /k/. I chose to end the poem with a dramatic and accusatory /u/, calling attention to the similarity between the grandmother, “you” and the coldly personified, “moon” by linking them sonically. By expressing and therefore, insisting on the relationship between the pitch in these two different words, I hope to have shown another dimension of the pitches’ capabilities in terms of also operating to develop the line figuratively.

Of William Carlos William’s well known poem about an old woman eating plums Levertov writes, “First the statement is made; then the word good is (without the clumsy overemphasis a change of typeface would give) brought to the center of our (and her) attention for an instant; then the word taste is given similar momentary prominence, with "good" sounding on a new note, reaffirmed so that we have first the general recognition of well-being, then the intensification of that sensation, then its voluptuous location in the sense of taste. And all this is presented through indicated pitches, that is, by melody, not by rhythm alone” (Levertov, 269). I agree with Levertov’s breakdown of “To A Poor Old Woman,” the placement of “good” on each line intensifies and implies, based on its varying position. But when I read this poem, I was interested in how the line break almost

seemed to change the meaning of each line, even though it was the same sentence being repeated. This fascination eventually evolved into curiosity: I wondered if I could give a single line multiple meanings by breaking the line at strategic places. In “Without A Map” I experiment with the line break’s ability to multiply and define a line.

In the corner i tell myself
that is a portrait
when it is clear
it’s not
a mirror
i know I’ve passed i know
i’ve passed before

The second through fourth lines express two statements at once. At first the speaker falsely assures her/himself that the object is a portrait, although it is clear, or obvious, that it is not, instead it is “a mirror.” Secondly, the speaker is assuring him/herself that the object is indeed a portrait, because it is clear, or not effaced. He or she insists that “it’s not/a mirror.”

The line break in this poem is being utilized to enrich the Psychological Horror tropes of unreliable narration and a muddled sense of self. In other words, the speaker cannot tell if she/he is looking into a portrait or a mirror, and by

breaking the line in certain places she/he expresses that in one statement. I use this method in my psychological horror poems because confusion is an important element to the experience of horror, but I would probably not use line breaks to do this kind of work in other poems outside of the Horror genre. This is how line breaks can contribute to style, this is where I stray from Levertov's definition of how a line break functions.

It is not really not that I disagree with any of the functions of a line break that Levertov articulates, rather I disagree that there is one authoritative function of the line break. I will use excerpted lines Levertov provides in her essay to demonstrate what I mean. "As children in their night/ gowns go upstairs…" Of this line break Levertov writes, "an awkward and inexpressive 'rest' occurs between two words that the poet, reading aloud, links naturally as 'nightgowns'" (Levertov, 270). She continues to point out the function of peer workshops, how one of the principle contributions a peer can give a poet is to point out inconsistencies of how the poem appears on the page versus how the poet reads their poem. In other words, since the line break represents a hesitation in the process of thought, it is unnatural to break the line between compound words since the reader will not read it aloud with the hesitation.

Because line breaks can represent a hesitation in the thought process of a poem, I believe line breaks like the example above do have the potential to be expressive. Instead of reading the short breach between "night" and "gown" as a clumsy line break, I read the breach giving the line break the ability to

deconstruct the word nightgown, while also supplying two individual images for each line (one of children of in the night and the other of gowns ascending a staircase). Then, of course, the two lines holistically provide the image of children in their nightgowns ascending a staircase. In “The Regular” I break lines between compound words to deconstruct them, and multiply the connotations of the words.

> alone & the jukebox knows my gyrate
> & the waitress is my soul
> mate during happy hour
> stiffed in the freakish Sunday rush

By breaking the line between the compound words, I am giving two meanings to “soulmate” and demonstrating the development of the word through thought process. In a poem concerned with isolation as a part of humanity we struggle to adjust to and the ways working class perpetuates itself, here the speaker is saying “the waitress is my soul” or the plight of working class and waitressing will be her destiny. By the time the reader arrives to the next line and sees “mate” waiting, we understand what bonds the speaker and the waitress, who are soulmates in what they feel is a predetermined destiny and loneliness relieved briefly by Happy Hour. I make a similar move later on in the poem. “Tonight I’ll stare into the shot/glass she sent me, think of a number”

The break between “shot glass” emphasizes “shot” calling attention to its connotation as a wound, hole, or void even before the reader receives the entire image of the speaker staring into a shot glass in drunken self-pity.

This poem demonstrates with Levertov’s assertion that line breaks are “a tool, not a style, As a tool it can be incorporated into any style” (Levertov, 270). I am wary of using this move too often. It should be used to make important leaps, not at every opportunity to break a line cleverly. More to the point, this is a stylistic choice. I respectfully disagree with Levertov’s closing statement, “Only if writers can agree about the nature and function of this tool can readers fully cooperate, so that the poem shall have the fullest degree of autonomous life” (Levertov, 272). I do agree that if we writers agreed that the line break has one function, poetry might be easier to understand, since the rule would govern the way we read the poem. Still, for me, the function of a line is determined by the stylistic and craft preference of the poet. To say that the line should have one function would stifle a poems autonomy and creative potential.

All this strategy and conversation for what seems like a simple task (breaking the line) helps organically craft and inform the raw emotions (the fever) in my poetry.

Section 7: A Women’s Voice In Gaming

In When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision, written in 1971, Adrienne Rich writes, “In the last few years the women’s movement has drawn

inescapable and illuminating connections between our sexual lives and our political institutions" (Rich, 374). 45 years have passed since this essay was first published, significant changes in our society's inclusion of women (including women of color, sexual orientation, and gender identification), yet social media and the internet has revealed what happens to a woman who speaks her mind in male dominated subcultures.

As I mentioned earlier, many of my poems have been influenced by video games, which is still a male dominated subculture. Although the argument can be made that many independent game designers have created games which subvert the stereotypical characteristics of video games (first person shooter, warfare glorification, explicit violence) online conversations, such as "Gamergate" have brought to light internet culture wars, where defensive men, desperate to maintain gaming as an exclusively male subculture, anonymously make misogynistic and violent threats against women who advocate for more inclusive elements in video games. On Gamergate subreddits, women (notably independent game designers) have been shamed on the internet for their private sexual lives, their personal contact information leaked on the web, and death threats made against them (Dewey). Really, Gamergate is a revolt against feminism, made by anonymous men. These threats to women have justified my poetry which focuses on the subversion of power dynamics.

Women, like all those working to understand and redefine their identity within a range of contexts, are doing so within the context of video games,

similarly how we have redefined ourselves within the realm of poetry. “Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive for self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society” (Rich, 347). Poetry is the arena in which I choose to revise my experience as a woman, but the influence gaming and horror has on my poetry is important to me because the anger within my poetry can be, in part, traced to a subculture which I value and one that is still very male dominated. Though I understand the privilege of gaming as a developed country luxury, the misogyny within it reveals the vital need for women voices in the United States.

Section 8: Conclusion

Ultimately, my poetry is the rejection of powerlessness, whether it be misogyny, oppressive environments, working class struggle, and even the fight between the selves which inhabit us. The poem that best embodies and melds all these anxieties is “Ariella,” which I wrote to my sister who has lived and grown with me through all these contexts.

I am afraid

like I used to be. There is a man in our foreclosed house,
his nose smashed under pantyhose. He wants into the room
we have always shared like February. Tell me it’s just the wind

and that words can't slash a tire. The hills are approaching
fertility again. Be careful when you are there

In this confessional poem, I am upfront about the state of fear, "I'm afraid/like I used to be." The Inland Empire was hit hard during the housing market crash; many homes in the region went into foreclosure, including our childhood home. In other words, our childhood has become like a foreclosed house. "There is a man in our foreclosed house/his nose smashed under pantyhose" A burglar-like man, a very realistic threat, invades our home or memory of childhood. I then ask, like a child, for my big sister to comfort me, "Tell me it is just the wind/and that words can't slash a tire." Again, the slashed tire represents violence.

All these anxieties are brought to light by experience: a dark coming-of-age into an adult consciousness which is aware of danger approaching from a multitude of angles. For me a part of leaving adolescence, is working toward resolving the fears consuming the self. I have begun writing poems outside of these landscapes, like Lucy in "Lucy Downtown" these newer poems are "ready for the sun."

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APPENDIX

THE HIBISCUS SNAKE